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Mercury Thermostat Collection and Recycling

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A Fact Sheet for HVAC Contractors And Wholesale Distributors

Illinois
Environmental
Protection Agency
Office of Pollution
Prevention

April 2011

On July 1, 2008, the State of Illinois joined several other states in prohibiting the sale and distribution of new mercury-switch thermostats that are used to activate heating and cooling equipment in buildings. In 2010, the Mercury Thermostat Collection Act was passed, requiring thermostat manufactures to establish collection programs for recycling mercury-switch thermostats when they are taken out of service. The purpose of these two state laws is to keep mercury from entering the environment. Wall-mounted mercury-switch thermostats are a major source of mercury in the solid waste stream. The thermostats may be broken when disposed of by traditional methods, allowing the mercury to be released into the air and eventually settling into water or onto land.

The key provisions of the mercury switch collection law include:

- Bans the disposal of mercury-switch thermostats in solid waste intended for disposal in a sanitary landfill, beginning July 1, 2011.

- Requires heating, ventilation and cooling (HVAC) contractors or service technicians to recycle mercury-switch thermostats that are taken out of service, beginning July 1, 2011.
- Requires thermostat wholesalers (typically heating, plumbing and electrical supply businesses) to act as a collection point for out-of-service mercury thermostats, beginning July 1, 2011. Thermostat wholesalers not participating in the program are prohibited from selling or distributing thermostats.
- Requires thermostat manufacturers to make collection containers available to all thermostat wholesalers and qualified HVAC contractors. Retailers and qualified local government authorities may also request a collection container. Requires thermostat manufacturers to pay for the transportation of the collected mercury-switch thermostats to an appropriate recycling facility.
- Requires thermostat manufacturers to develop and distribute educational materials to help make wholesalers and HVAC contractors aware of the requirements of the law.

- Requires Illinois EPA to conduct educational outreach, create an Internet site and report on the progress of the mercury-switch thermostat collection efforts in the state.
- Establishes goals for the collection of mercury-switch thermostats in the first four years of the program. Provides IEPA with authority for setting the collection goals for 2015 to 2020, and require updates to the collection programs if the goals are not achieved. The mercury thermostat collection program sunsets on January 1, 2021.
- Includes penalties for thermostat manufacturers, thermostat wholesalers and HVAC contractors that do not meet the requirements of the law.

Collection Goals

The collection programs established by the thermostat manufacturers under the law must be designed to collectively achieve the following statewide goals.

- 2011 – 5,000 mercury thermostats
- 2012 – 15,000 mercury thermostats
- 2013 – 15,000 mercury thermostats
- 2014 – 15,000 mercury thermostats
- 2015 to 2020 – Illinois EPA determines the collection goals with input from stakeholder groups

Why should I be concerned about mercury in thermostats?

When mercury-switch thermostats are disposed of in the trash, the switch can break, allowing the mercury to be released to the environment.

Mercury poses a health risk to everybody, but especially to young children and fetuses because they are still developing. Prolonged, low level exposure may cause learning disabilities by hurting the ability of children to think and read. Adults who have been exposed to high levels of mercury may experience trembling hands and numbness or tingling in their lips, tongues, fingers and toes. Acute mercury poisoning, especially through ingestion, can damage the brain, liver, kidneys and even cause death. Mercury can harm wildlife that eats contaminated fish, particularly bald eagles, loons and other fish-eating birds and mammals.

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Collection Locations

For a current list of thermostat collection sites, visit the Thermostat Recycling Corporation website: www.thermostat-recycle.org.

Thermostat retailers and qualified units of local governments are not required to be collection locations for mercury-switch thermostats, but can be one if they so desire. Qualified units of local government include household hazardous waste facilities, solid waste management agencies, environmental management agencies and departments of public health can be collection locations.

For more information:

If you have any questions about the Illinois Mercury Thermostat Collection Act or any other mercury related product laws, please contact Becky Jayne, Illinois EPA, at either (217) 524-9642 or Becky.Jayne@illinois.gov.

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Pollution Prevention
P. O. Box 19276
1021 North Grand Avenue E.
Springfield, IL 62794-9276

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